



Jesuit Refugee Service
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RESCUED WHAT NEXT?

PROTECTION SEEKERS STRANDED IN SICILY



“This is no life to live. I am tired of my life, I swear, I burn myself so I won’t think anymore because I can’t take it. I have no hope for the future in Italy. I thought that once I got a document, I could study, but nothing happened. After seven years, my hands are still tied, I went nowhere so what’s the point? I don’t care about my life anymore – I’m tired. I’ve lost seven years, I could not go to school, I could not work, so why give me a document at all?”

Jawad



When the migrants arrive in Lampedusa, they soon realise they have a long way to go before they have a chance of getting the protection they need.

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Rescued: what next?

Mare Nostrum

In October 2013, hundreds of forced migrants who left Libya in a bid to reach Europe died when two boats capsized in the Mediterranean Sea within barely a week of one another.

Sadly it comes as no surprise that people should die while seeking asylum and a life in dignity in a country more peaceful, democratic and developed than their own. Their journey is usually undertaken via illegal and hence highly risky channels because it is the only way to travel without the required documents – destination countries guard their borders jealously. The real number of those who perish in the attempt is unknown, because many deaths go unrecorded, but is surely astronomical. UNHCR says 1,889 people died in the first eight months of 2014 while crossing the Mediterranean to try to reach Europe.

What drew international attention and condemnation to these two incidents was the fact that they happened so close to shore – one was in full view of the Italian island of Lampedusa – and that the number of casualties was so high. In one boatload, entire families of Syrian asylum seekers perished.

In the wake of the October 2013 tragedies, the Italian government launched Mare Nostrum (our sea), a maritime operation aimed at rescuing asylum seekers and migrants

who cross the Mediterranean in overcrowded and unseaworthy boats. While tragedies continue to happen, Mare Nostrum has saved more than 100,000 lives. Sadly, the Italian government has indicated it may well be unable to extend the operation into a second year.

The increased number of boats intercepted thanks to Mare Nostrum – combined, no doubt, with war and stubborn instability in so many countries – has led to a leap in the number of forced migrants landing on the islands of Sicily and, to a lesser extent, Lampedusa. In 2014 alone, 100,000 had reached Italian shores by August, and there were days when up to nearly 1,000 people disembarked.

We need a plan!

Italy's first-level reception systems are totally unprepared to cope with such large numbers and are stretched way beyond their limits. Centres are overcrowded and new arrivals sometimes end up sleeping in tents. In Sicily, they are hastily accommodated in gyms, sports grounds, churches and other public spaces that then need to be cleared for their proper use.

A Caritas Catania statement issued on 20 July 2014 denounced the “indifference” surrounding the reception of new arrivals and drew attention to a gym called Palaspedini, where people were sleeping on foul-

Just arrived in Lampedusa.



smelling mattresses in hot, restricted and dirty spaces marked out by iron railings. Don Piero Galvano, the director of Caritas Catania, said: “Migrants deserve more dignity and respect. If any of us had to live in the conditions in which the immigrants are accommodated, wouldn't he expect help, respect and welcome from others?”

The mayors of Sicilian towns, more used to welcoming tourists for short seaside holidays, complain that they are on the verge of collapse and desperately need more human and financial resources. The police are hard pressed to cope with their usual duties of preserving law and order together

with the extra burden imposed by the reception of new arrivals.

However local media and NGOs consistently point to a glaring flaw in the provisional and disorganised nature of the response: they say the Sicilian authorities are still treating the sea of arrivals as an “emergency” when in reality it is anything but. So-called ‘boat people’ have been arriving to Sicily for the past 20 years, and while it is true that numbers spiked in 2014, the arrivals are no longer as unexpected as before. With the Italian naval forces actively rescuing people and bringing them in, the authorities should be in a position to put more systematic structures in place.

This is what the central Italian government has been trying to do in recent months. Realising the impossibility of a strategy that places on the south of the country all the onus of hosting forced migrants and processing their asylum claims, Italy has decided to revamp the entire reception system. Starting around the spring of 2014, the government set up an emergency parallel system that dispersed some asylum seekers throughout Italy. In July, legal steps were taken to formalise and fund this system with a three-year plan to dispatch new arrivals immediately to regional hubs.

A painfully poor response

While the steps taken by the Italian government appear to be in the right direction, it is still early days to gauge the effectiveness of their implementation. Meanwhile the response in Sicily, however well meaning, remains mostly one of panic, of superficial and ad-hoc measures that deliver a painfully poor service to forced migrants. The inadequate response persists throughout the asylum procedure and even when (and if) the migrants get some kind of protection or permission to stay in Italy. The system is drastically under-resourced and there is not nearly enough of anything to go around. Thousands

end up sleeping on the streets, at the mercy of anyone who decides to exploit their want and misery.

Countless asylum seekers do not stay in the system. They avoid being fingerprinted on arrival and vanish into oblivion. Many continue their journey to reach European countries further north. At all costs, they are determined to bypass the restrictive Dublin Regulation, by which European Union states return asylum seekers to the first member state they entered, Italy, in this case. Statistics bear out this reality: in the first seven months of 2014, there were 83,000 boat arrivals and 25,000 asylum applications in Italy. Other forced migrants who circumvent the system get stuck in Sicily, where their undocumented status makes them prey to exploitation by organised crime rackets for drugs, prostitution and agricultural labour (see also page 26).





Catania, 10 August 2014: A boatload of migrants arrived at dawn. Six died as they tried to swim to the beach and their bodies washed up on the shore.

For those who choose to stay in the system, Sicilian NGOs have long been urging the authorities to come up with a plan that has sufficient resources, humanity and oversight to make it workable.

A question of goodwill

Many NGOs, including faith-based agencies, are doing a wonderful job in reaching out to refugees and other forced migrants. But the task is far from easy. Apart from the overwhelming needs, it can be deeply frustrating to run services in this sector due to rampant corruption. For some, immigration is nothing more than a profitable racket, and people are objects to be fleeced as much as possible. The state outsources the management of accommodation centres and other services to the private and non-profit sectors (whether the partner is private or non-profit depends on the kind of centre). The theoretically

high standards of calls for tenders are frequently skirted in practice by unscrupulous entities that have the right connections but lack the requisite competence and experience. Of course the situation gets worse in times of emergency. One local newspaper article about a possible scandal linked to the running of an accommodation centre was aptly headlined: “*Business profughi*” (Refugee business). It is a colossal business indeed and, in Sicily, there is always the risk of organised crime infiltrating the sector.

Another serious problem is the near-total lack of official oversight of the services that cater to asylum seekers and refugees. Professional and humane behaviour ultimately boils down to a question of goodwill and personal conscience. So while some associations and individuals deliver a very good service, others do not and sometimes even behave shamefully.



The reception at Centro Astalli in Catania is the first point of contact for many migrants who seek help.

Why we wrote this booklet

While the international press has focused on the flow of forced migrants reaching Sicily and Lampedusa in recent months, far less attention has been paid to what happens to those who end up staying in Sicily.

The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) in Italy, known as Centro Astalli, has offices in Rome, Trento, Vicenza, Palermo and Catania, offering a range of services including legal aid, healthcare, language classes, material and psychosocial support, and help to find employment.

Our presence in Sicily allows us to witness first-hand the suffering of refugees and other forced migrants struggling to survive there. Their trials are aggravated by the chaos that prevails in the island's overwhelmed immigration services and by Italy's many economic woes.

We wanted to give a voice to those who agreed to share their experience in Sicily to highlight the urgent need for changes in Italy's reception system. We hope their experiences and insights will be heeded and that more realistic measures will be put in place to effectively ensure respect for the human dignity and basic rights of all refugees and forced migrants.

Who we interviewed

The picture of migration in Sicily is a complex one. In 2013, according to statistics, there were nearly 140,000 foreigners on the island, mostly migrants from North Africa and Romania who came for work, living in the towns of Palermo, Messina and Catania. Then there are people from sub-Saharan Africa, especially from Eritrea, Somalia and West Africa, seeking asylum from war and persecution or a better chance at life for

themselves and their families. Syrians escaping relentless war in their country are also reaching Sicily in large numbers, although they tend to move on as soon as possible, if they can. Others still, from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, travel a different route than the central Mediterranean to end up in Sicily.

Many men undertake the dangerous journey alone, in the hope that they can first settle down, get their papers and then organise a legal and safe way for their families to join them. However many families arrive too, especially from Syria, as do single women and children travelling alone: of 100,000 people who arrived in the first eight months of 2014, nearly 9,700 were unaccompanied minors.

The willingness of people to share their experiences and the need to

“The parish priest of a church near Catania train station sometimes finds migrants praying in the church. They ask for nothing, they are exhausted; you can see from their clothes, falling off them, torn, that they have just disembarked but don’t want to make themselves known, so they run away.”

Elvira Iovino, Centro Astalli

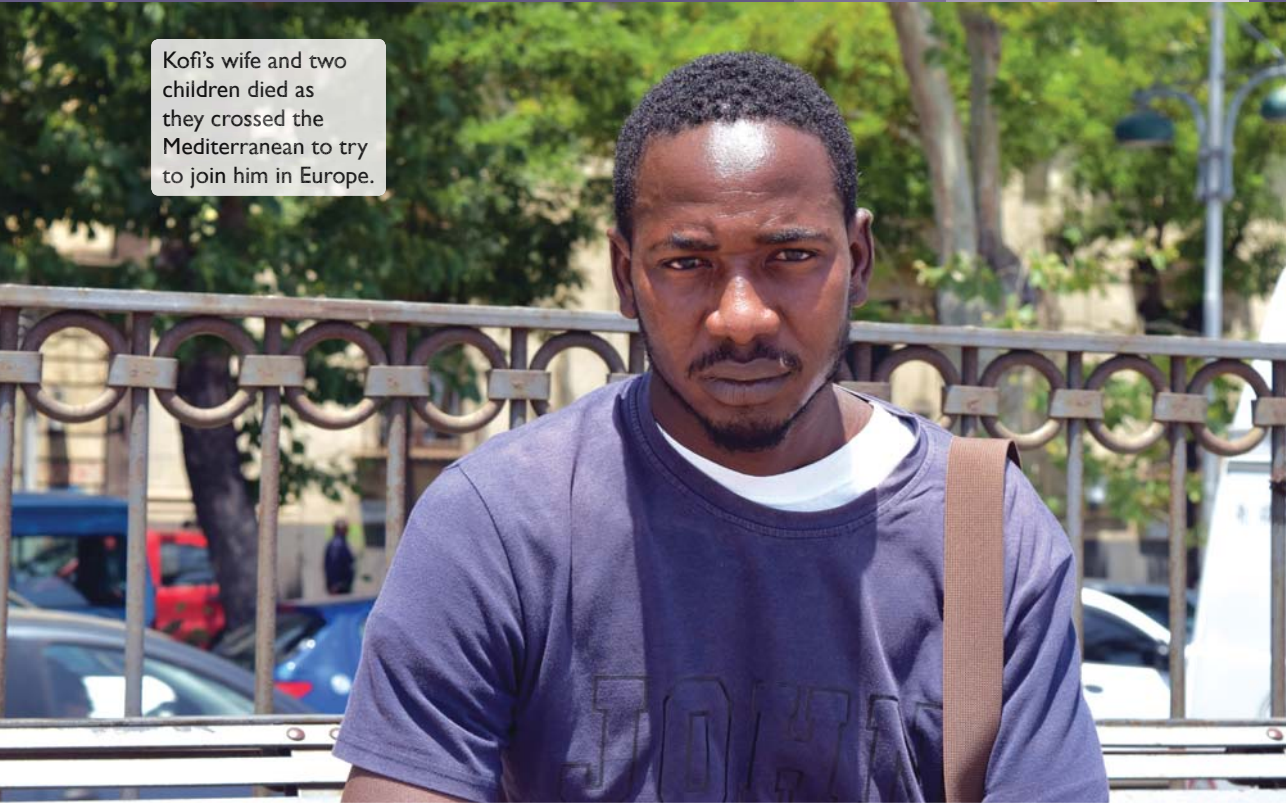
focus prompted us to interview men from sub-Saharan Africa, Pakistan or Afghanistan who were living either in Catania or at a massive reception centre for asylum seekers called CARA di Mineo. The men had arrived alone or with their families, and had been granted protection or were somewhere in the asylum process. To protect their identity, we do not use their real names in this report, and do not mention their country of origin unless necessary.

The European dimension

Despite the clear European dimension to the refugee influx, there has been no co-ordinated EU response. European leaders trust in the efficacy of the Dublin Regulation to send asylum seekers back to the country they first entered to make their asylum claim. And many migrants who have sought better protection standards in northern Europe have in fact been sent back to Italy, to face the same overstretched asylum systems and precarious living standards.

Sadly, there has been a lack of solidarity and other European states have not only shown Italy the cold shoulder, but failed the forced migrants themselves. They are seen as a ‘burden’ rather than fellow human beings in need, and the international responsibility to protect them has all but been forgotten. In fact, the EU continues to prioritise border control over improving asylum and reception systems: from 2007 to 2013, the EU allocated about 700 million euro to support asylum procedures, but almost 1,820 million euro for border controls.

Kofi's wife and two children died as they crossed the Mediterranean to try to join him in Europe.



I went nowhere so what's the point?

The eyes of Kofi left the most lasting impression. Big, black and mournful, filled with tears, they willed us to understand his words, simple and repetitive in themselves.

“I have too much stress, I want to free my mind, because I have a lot of stress. I have so much stress,” he kept saying. A young man from Gambia, Kofi was – like so many refugees and forced migrants – a victim of circumstances that had spun out of his control. After reaching Sicily he tried to go to Switzerland but was returned as per the Dublin Regulation. His wife and two

children, aged six and two, drowned in the Mediterranean when they tried to follow him to Europe.

“I used to be a happy type of guy, cheerful and making jokes all the time, but now I've really changed, I just can't laugh and smile like I used to. If only I could have another family, at least one child, so I can start over again,” said Kofi.

Kofi was verging on a numbing despair that threatened to suck all his reserves of strength, energy and hope. We saw this despair in other asylum seekers and refugees in Sicily. Sometimes, the

longer they had been there, the deeper their despair, because they could see they weren't going anywhere. Even if they had the all-important document conferring protection or permission to stay in Italy, they still had no stable job, no home they could call their own, they didn't really feel part of the community... and they had given up on seeing their dreams come true.

Those who had been in Sicily for months, as opposed to years, clung fiercely to hope – *if only I can get my document, it will be ok*. Even Kofi, despite the personal tragedies he had endured, nurtured a glimmer of hope that he could start over.

In common with refugees around the world, the people we met harboured trauma from past experiences, chafed at enforced idleness, and worried constantly about their families back home. They were frustrated about delays in the asylum procedure and their dependence on the decisions and goodwill of others for everything from a daily meal to the precious documents they so badly needed.

However, not all those we interviewed were negative. A few were actually

optimistic and cheerful while others adopted a “wait and see” stance. Here we saw smiles and hope or at least a semblance of serenity.

Whatever they felt about their fate, practically all the asylum seekers and refugees displayed two sentiments we found moving: one was an unwavering belief in Europe as a mecca of peace,



Kofi used to sleep in this broken-down car at night. It still provides shelter for homeless migrants.

human rights and democracy – even if they felt let down by the way they have been treated here – and the other was warm gratitude to the Italian people for rescuing them from the sea and for the hospitality extended to them.

“I am in Europe, a continent that is calm, where people respect one another. If there is this respect, you can be here.”

Marcel

“We thank the Italian people because they are lodging us in a peaceful place and that is wonderful.

Please understand: there is no place like home, if you have no problem in your country, you don't leave, we are here because we had a problem. I have too much stress, I feel myself getting more useless by the day. I can't even speak the language; my mind is not here, how can I learn if my mind is not with me? I have two children, but I haven't seen them since I left my country more than two years ago, they couldn't even talk then. Sometimes they give us phone cards but it's not enough time to talk. If I could at least call my family, it would steady my mind.”

Abdul

“Here you're not with your parents, you're not with your family, you don't know what is happening to them and they don't know what is happening to you, so we think about each other all the time and worry.”

Matthieu

“You have problems at home, then you find problems here again, what can you do? Remember, we are all here because we have problems in our country. No one would leave otherwise. So if I leave home because I have a problem, you are supposed to look after me like I am in my country... I want to acknowledge the efforts of the Italian people because they are trying hard to help the immigrants who come by boat. Were it not for them, so many more people would be dead.”

Issouf



Arrivals in Lampedusa.



Refugees are weighed down by memories of the violence they left behind. Pictured here is an attack in Afghanistan.



"I left Afghanistan after two of my brothers were killed. My home was destroyed, my father's shop was burned down and nothing is left. I don't want to remember how my brothers were killed, please don't ask me about it. I travelled via Iran, Turkey and Greece. I spent two and a half years on the road, crossing the mountains on foot, going on horseback, in trucks, by boat. Many of those with me died. The first time I tried to cross from Turkey to Greece, we were 24 in all, and we were deported. The second time we tried, the boat sank and only seven survived. I fell in the water too and a Greek policeman saved me. Finally I came to Italy and then from here I went to Norway, France, Germany and Belgium. I requested asylum in Norway but they rejected my application. So I came back to Italy. I want to be ok, I want to have a better future, not an ugly one, without problems, without fear. But every day, my heart is down. I haven't heard from my family in seven months. When I call my parents, they cry and I cry, I can't even talk. What can we do? When I am alone, I cry, I remember everything, people lying dead in front of me, my brothers, my friends on the journey drowning in the sea or suffocating in the truck under the cargo because there wasn't enough space... I want to be happy but I am always thinking about these things. I want a peaceful life for my family and for me, but it has never been this way. It has never been good, not since the day I was born, when there were bombs falling on my home. I hope the future will be better but I can't see it yet."

Abraham

"I was well off in Afghanistan. I left because the Taliban tortured me; they shot me and smashed my teeth. This is why I left my country, to find peace, to move ahead. But there is nothing, I feel like I am drifting in the middle of nowhere and that I will remain like this all my life. I can't go back home but I want to go whether they kill me or not. What can I do here? Roam the streets day and night? I've lost so much weight this past year; I was never so thin. My head doesn't work anymore, night and day I am thinking, thinking, grinding my teeth. This is no life to live. I am tired of my life, I swear, I burn myself so I won't think anymore because I can't take it. I have no hope for the future in Italy. I thought that once I got a document, I could study, but nothing happened. After seven years, my hands are still tied, I went nowhere so what's the point? I don't care about my life anymore – I'm tired. I've lost seven years, I could not go to school, I could not work, so why give me a document at all? I've become very desperate now. I don't want to talk, not even one word, I want to stay alone, in a place where no one can talk to me."

Jawad

You have to queue for everything

Life at CARA di Mineo

When migrants land in Lampedusa or Sicily, the registration process begins. They are accommodated in first-level reception facilities and, once processed, those seeking refugee status are taken to a CARA (see glossary) to await the decision on their request for asylum.

Many end up in the infamous CARA di Mineo, a mega-centre housing some 4,000 asylum seekers that is situated on the road between Catania and the town of Gela. On arrival, they are told they will be there for six months, but delays in the asylum procedure

inevitably mean they end up staying for longer, often twice as long or more.

More than a centre, CARA di Mineo is a village of rows of pre-fabricated houses surrounded by barbed wire and armed guard. The CARA is a totally incongruous structure in the rural Sicilian landscape that surrounds it. Planted in the middle of nowhere, the centre has been described as “*una cattedrale nel deserto*” – a cathedral in the desert, which is another way of calling it a white elephant. The premises were originally used by the personnel of a US military air station



Walking on the road from CARA di Mineo towards Catania. The journey takes an hour by car.

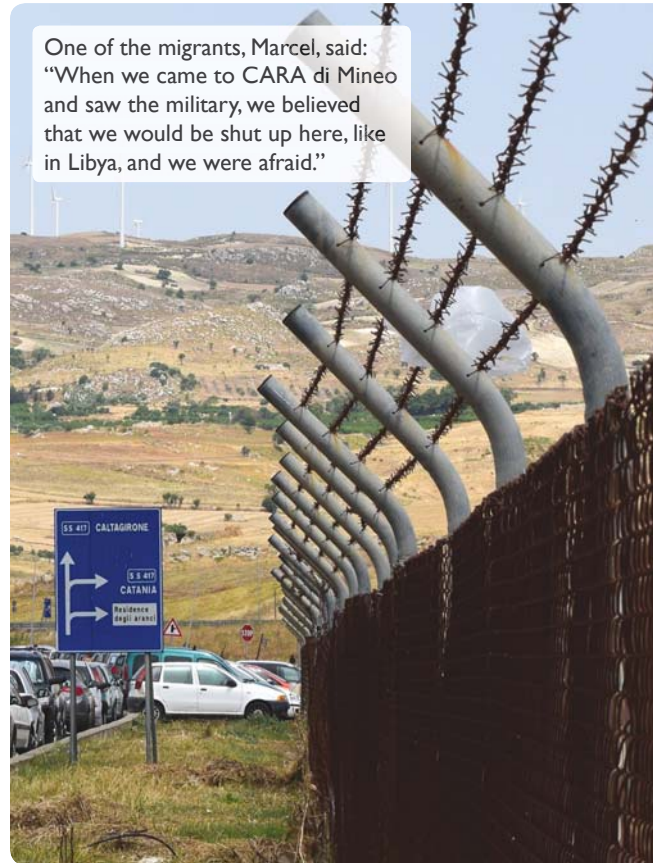
“Recently we assisted a young Nigerian Christian. He spent seven months parked at CARA di Mineo; it’s such a shame. He was not taught a single word of Italian and he was not enlisted in the health service although he had severe scabies that he contracted on the boat.”

*Elvira Iovino,
Centro Astalli*

and include a sports ground, a bar, swings for children and other facilities.

But the comfort runs no more than skin-deep. The asylum seekers at the CARA di Mineo feel confined and frustrated by the long delays, overcrowding, isolation and because they have little or nothing to do. Technically speaking, CARA di Mineo is an open centre, so the asylum seekers may come and go as they please, provided they clock back in every evening (they may get permission to leave for a few nights). But the place is so remote and their resources so limited that many don’t venture out at all.

For anyone staying at CARA di Mineo, integration is nothing short of a physical impossibility – the centre is simply a massive waiting room where the residents kick their heels while hoping to get the documents that will allow them to get on with their lives as soon as possible.



One of the migrants, Marcel, said: “When we came to CARA di Mineo and saw the military, we believed that we would be shut up here, like in Libya, and we were afraid.”

“It’s boring inside the camp, you have to queue for one or two hours to eat, sometimes fights break out in the line. You cannot really create space for 4,000 people to eat, can you? I never thought I would leave my country but when I had to do so, and I crossed the sea to Lampedusa, I thought I had come to a free life. But now I see it is not so. I know that if I have documents, I can continue my life, go to school, learn the language, look for work.”

Jonathon

“I’ve been here at CARA di Mineo for nearly one year and three months. I received a negative decision and I am appealing because I know that if you are here without documents, you are nothing. This is why I am still here, sitting in one place, not doing anything, not going anywhere, because I am waiting. Here at CARA di Mineo, it’s not like morning is easy and night is tough, it’s always difficult. You have to queue for everything. Sometimes, getting meals is a problem. Because there are so many people, you have to stay in a queue for two hours to get food. I can’t be in a queue every day for so many months. We want to leave this kind of life, to be free and to benefit the country that has helped us. We are still under control here, and it’s very different from being on our own. I am definitely tired, this is a camp, not a city, it is really too much. I need documents. I’ve never experienced something like this before. I want to leave this system, to be free.”

Abdul

“Before it was worse at CARA di Mineo. The way they were taking care of us was very bad, just food and that’s all. We had to protest for clothes, toothpaste, soap, and then they would give you once and that’s it. Something else is that the Italian teachers at CARA di Mineo could only speak Italian. It was difficult for us to understand and I was discouraged. I had a copybook where I used to write things in English and then I would go to people working at CARA to ask ‘what is the meaning of this or that?’ They would write in Italian and that’s how I started picking up some words.”

Samir

“We were rescued at sea and brought to Lampedusa. We stayed for three days before they brought us here to CARA di Mineo. The time to go before the commission is too long for us, 10, 11 months. They feed us and look after us here – we are ok. We can go to Italian classes if we want, we have a football field, we have advice, social workers, free healthcare. But what I want to see in this camp is job opportunities – we need to do something.”

Michael

CARA di Mineo.





“When we came to CARA di Mineo and saw the military, we believed we would be shut up here, like in Libya, and we were afraid. I spent one year and two months in Mineo. There are many ethnic groups there and this always caused problems. The houses were overcrowded and even going to the bathroom posed a problem: you had to queue. To get clothes, again you had to queue. Also, we could not study Italian well because there were too many people in class, around 50 at times, and we could not understand what the teacher was saying.

What I’ll never forget is the time an Eritrean man killed himself because he got a negative response to his asylum application. This was very bad. We came here to have freedom, we didn’t come here to find more problems, to be shut up in an isolated place where we don’t know anything, because that place is too far away from Catania and anywhere else, practically in the bush.”

Marcel

“I want to stay here at CARA di Mineo to be a cultural mediator because there isn’t one for my country. At first, I wasn’t happy here, but now it’s ok. I have friends and also I am thinking of work – it would be good if I could get this job. The Italians who work here are good. Although life at CARA is ok, one problem is that now the houses are very crowded. Another thing is the clinic: they told my friend he would need 2,500 euro for an operation in his nose, they did nothing to help him and he can’t breathe or sleep well at night. We earn nothing here, how could he pay that money?”

Ahmed

“I get very upset when I see the others here at CARA di Mineo calling their families back home because I don’t have anyone to call. I stay inside my room all the time. I only go out to eat and I go back to my room. There is nowhere to go and I have no friends. Actually I can leave now because I have a paper to show I am appealing my asylum decision. But I am staying here because I have nobody, where can I go?”

Adam

Wait, wait, wait The asylum procedure

Italy's asylum procedure was clearly a source of frustration, bewilderment and worry for the people we interviewed. Nothing new in this – asylum seekers in other host countries would say exactly the same about the unfriendly and confusingly bureaucratic systems they trust will deliver the protection they seek.

The reasons why are not hard to find. Most of the asylum seekers we met filed their application at CARA di Mineo and were inevitably called for their interview months later than promised. After a nervous time of waiting for the result, the asylum seekers were bitterly disappointed if they “got a negative” – as they put it. This is only natural: the solution they had pinned all their hopes on had been taken away, they wouldn't get the longed-for document. But their disappointment stemmed from something else too. Put simply, they just didn't expect it from Europe. They expected Europe to play the game, to consider their application fairly and according to human rights principles, so they felt short-changed when they got what they perceived to be an unfair rejection.

Government plans to at least double the number of refugee commissions should go some way in addressing delays in the processing of asylum applications. However, another source

“We came to Lampedusa on 19 June 2013, there were 84 people on our boat, but 22 were killed when we hit a ship and capsized. I am lucky; I could be a dead man now. I am at CARA di Mineo with my wife and five-month-old child and we have no documents yet... I went to the commission last month but have no result yet. Whenever I go to ask, they say wait, wait, wait... I've been waiting for 11 months, my mind is very hot now, it's not easy to be in one place for all this time, just to eat and sleep, eat and sleep. I am tired, I pray to God I can leave here and get a home and a job.”

Peter

of frustration was that most asylum seekers did not receive the information and advice they needed to prepare for their interview before the local Refugee Commission and to navigate the asylum procedure. At the time we conducted our interviews, there was only a handful of lawyers at CARA di Mineo to deal with the first-instance asylum claims of some 4,000 people. Rejected asylum seekers who want to appeal may be referred to lawyers specialised in immigration law and some do benefit from this service. However not all lawyers are scrupulous in providing a proper service to their clients, with some picking up the fee per case provided by the state without paying much attention to their client's case. The upshot of all this – the delays, the lack of proper information and

Waiting at
CARA di Mineo.



“At CARA di Mineo, they gave us no guiding points about how to ask for asylum. So most of us just went for our interview without knowing anything about what the commission is and what the process is about. When I was there, I was appointed as my country’s representative. Most of the migrants complained about documents. That was the biggest problem. They would come to tell us representatives to go and tell the commission to work faster. Once, we stayed up until 2am, trying to calm people down. If you see the migrants in the camp protesting on television, and you see the way they react, you probably think they’re stupid or crazy. But it is what they face in the camp that pushes them to act in this way... the overcrowding, the isolation, the uncertainty over documents, the conditions... The authorities promised to do things but never did them and this discouraged me, because if you promise me something, I put it in my mind that I will have it and when it never comes, I get more and more frustrated.”

Samir

support, the rejections – is that some asylum seekers feel cheated.

All this is regrettable but still within the confines of the law. In the case of one young man we met,

however, there was a clear breach of international law because he and some other Nigerians were denied the chance to apply for asylum (see page 19). How many other cases like this occur, it is impossible to say.

“I was in Libya when the war broke out there. I was arrested and thrown into prison. Then I was taken to the beach with many others and told I had to go to Italy. I didn’t want to go but I had to, I was put in a boat and reached Lampedusa. They fingerprinted me, asked me why I had come to Italy and then transferred me to CARA di Mineo. I was told that after six months, I would have my interview with the commission. This happened after nine months and my application for asylum was rejected. The day they gave me a negative decision, I couldn’t believe it, because I thought there was peace and democracy in Europe; that Europeans know the law. I was very angry. I lost my parents and everything back home and I thought life would be better in Europe.”

Adam

“When I got a negative, I went crazy... I was supposed to leave the camp and return to my country, which I could not do – the others who had been arrested with me are still in prison to this day. For days I couldn’t eat, I was thinking too much. Looking back now, I think it was because I was scared to tell my story in the interview. I thought they would check in the computer and send me back to my country. Then the Centro Astalli lawyer, who helped me with my appeal, told me it is ok to say my story, in fact I must tell it. I was not prepared for my first interview, I had no help, and I didn’t know what questions I would be asked. I didn’t know what I was saying. During the appeal, I explained my true story and I got a three-year document, which was later extended.”

Issouf

“I told my story to the commission and I don’t know why they rejected me. When we came here, we all accepted the law: they told us we had to stay here for six months. But I waited nine months for a negative reply and now I am still waiting.”

Abdul

“When I came to CARA di Mineo, they promised us that after five or six months we would go to the commission. I was called for my interview after 11 months and, after I went, I was rejected after three weeks. I’ve been unhappy and worried since... at midnight I wake up and I can’t sleep. I can’t go back to Nigeria so what shall I do? Should I kill myself or what? Someone committed suicide here, he hanged himself. Another tried to kill himself by setting himself on fire. I used to try to take an interest in things before but I don’t anymore. I am too confused with the kind of life I am living. We are in a free land here but I feel there is no one to help us.”

Jonathon

Sign, sign, sign

“The Italian Navy rescued our boat and we arrived in Lampedusa and slept there. The following morning, they split us into three groups, put us in different boats and took us to Pozzallo. When we arrived there, they welcomed us, gave us clothes to change and something to eat. Then they started something like registration. The following morning, they segregated black people from the others, who made up the majority. Nigerians specifically were set apart. Some of the others were taken away by bus – to a camp, I was told when I tried to find out what was going on. The following day, another bus took away everyone except us Nigerians. We were the only ones left, 25 out of around 320 who were in the boat. We didn’t know what was going on, what process or protocol they were following. I asked one of the women there and she said another bus was coming to take us to a camp because not everyone could go at once. Surprisingly, they called us and gave us a paper to sign, written in Italian words... I was the first one they called, I went into the office and there were a lot of policemen and other officers. I tried to ask them to translate the paper for me so I could understand what I was about to sign. But they told me there was no problem, I should *sign, sign, sign*. I tried to resist, saying I could not sign what I don’t know and they should at least tell me what this is all about, but they pressurised me, saying I should sign. Looking at the police there, I felt intimidated and that I had to sign. When I came out, I looked for someone to translate and found a man who could speak a bit of English at the gate. I asked him to help me... after going through the paper, he told me it was an expulsion letter and that we should leave Italian territory within seven days. It was horrible. We had all signed and when we gathered together, we tried to say we were not going anywhere. But the police drove us onto the streets.”

Godwin

All my bones used to hurt *Sleeping on the street*

Once asylum seekers are granted protection, they leave the CARA and graduate to accommodation known as SPRAR (see glossary). Ideally accommodating a few residents each, SPRAR centres are usually located in the heart of cities and towns all over Italy and, in June 2014, there were 19,000 places available. In August, the emergency parallel system set up by the Italian government was accommodating an additional 25,000 people. However, demand still falls far short of need so even if, technically speaking, refugees have the right to live in a SPRAR centre or other

accommodation, many end up with nowhere to go.

In Catania, some find temporary shelter in five dormitories run by NGOs and the Missionaries of Charity as well as a few other places including the city mosque. But countless people sleep on the streets – recognised refugees together with others awaiting the outcome of the appeal on their rejected asylum application, and still others who evaded the system altogether. They sleep at bus stops, at the train station, on patches of grass and benches, in abandoned cars, under stone arcades.



The Caritas help centre near the train station in Catania. Migrants queue here for food.

“When I came to Catania I spent a month sleeping outside. Then I stayed in a dormitory for nearly a year. We had to go in at 8pm and leave at 6am even if we had nowhere to go, even if we were sick, even if it was cold, we had to leave and stay outside. I didn’t know what to do, there was nothing to do, just sitting and thinking, all the time.”

Matthieu

Sometimes they are chased away. Some find a place in abandoned factories or warehouses by the harbour.

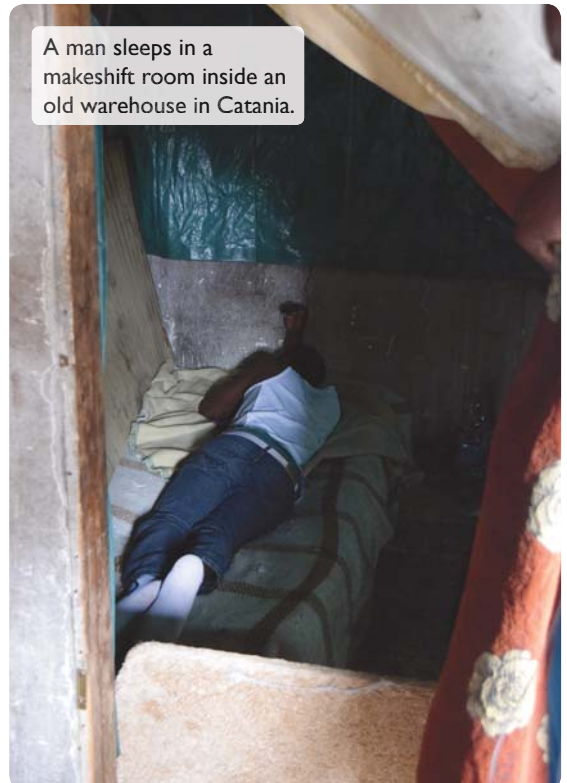
The asylum seekers and refugees we interviewed unanimously agreed that their time sleeping on the streets, ranging from weeks to months, was one of their worst memories.

“At first I was sleeping in the streets then Caritas found me a place to stay called Il Faro. I am happy there because I am not sleeping outside. To sleep in the street is not easy, all my bones used to hurt me. Even now, if I sleep in a bed, after two hours, I wake up in pain. I used to sleep on a carton, and that was all I had. I was alone. Sometimes I stayed at a bus stop, sometimes at the train station, placing my carton on the bench. I didn’t even have blankets. Every day I went to eat at Caritas. I would go to the town and ask friends to give me one or two euro to buy bread.”

Kofi

“When we arrived in Catania, we went to Caritas but they told us they have no place – we were outside for months, sleeping on the streets. Then Caritas found a place for us. We don’t do anything in the day because there is no work; this is very difficult for me. So I have started Italian school and later I walk around to see if I can find anything to do... I look for a place to sit down and wait until it is time to go back to the dormitory. What experiences will I never forget? The experience of sleeping outside in very cold weather, that was very bad, and of staying idle, without doing anything.”

Godwin



A man sleeps in a makeshift room inside an old warehouse in Catania.



A young migrant sleeps on a bench outside the railway station – not an uncommon sight in Catania.

“Norway was a good place to be. I was there for three years and I had a job, a place to live and food, but no documents. When they wanted to deport me, I worried about what would happen if they returned me to Afghanistan. So I came here because I heard Italy was good for refugees. But I spent two years without documents, without a home, without food or money. For three months I lived on the street without spare clothes or food. It was a bad time. In winter it was so cold, especially when it rained, and I was very sick. I wanted to die. I thought, why is this happening? One day, I thought about my family and country, and I felt so bad – it is so bad there and so bad here, how can I live? Then a friend helped me and took me to his place, I paid him when I could. I changed accommodation many times... one day one place and then another place the next because I had no money except when I found odd jobs here and there.”

Abraham



Migrants wash themselves next to rail tracks at the Catania train station.


“When they give you a document at CARA, they take you to the train station and drop you off, without even one euro in your hand. You really don’t know where to start. I left after a year and a half. I went to a SPRAR house near Agrigento, we were four residents, but I was not very happy there. There was nothing to do, I had no money in my pocket and I was learning nothing. So I left. I spent two years sleeping outside and it was difficult even to get food to eat. I tried going to Italy. I stayed in a place called the Ghetto outside Foggia in the south, a settlement where hundreds of African migrants live. Italian people go there to collect them for work. If you see this place and they tell you human beings live here, you won’t believe it; it’s terrible. ‘Houses’ are made out of carton, poles and rope. The ground is like clay and everything is dirty. I lost my documents there so I came back to Catania. It was very difficult to get them replaced, it has taken me over a year, and still it’s not over.

Back in Catania, I slept at the train station, in the rain in winter and the heat in summer. Actually we were outside because the station is closed at night. If we wanted to go inside because it was raining, the police would drive us away. There were many of us; we had nowhere to go. We used to go to Caritas to eat. It was a very bad experience, I felt like going out of this world because I had nothing to give me joy at that time. Not only did I have nothing, there was nothing I could do to get the things I needed, no one to give me the links to start somewhere. It was just faith that kept me going, I told myself, ‘leave it in the hands of God, whatever God says, it is going to be like that.’ Even if you go now to the train station, you will see women sleeping there with their children, from Eritrea, Somalia and other countries, it’s not fair.”

Samir

Paying the *pizzo*

Something we realised, although those we interviewed did not say it straight out, is just how much homeless refugees and asylum seekers depend on others for their survival. While they meet with many acts of kindness, there are also multiple hazards. One is the demand for protection money to sleep relatively undisturbed on the street or in an occupied house. It appears that it is mostly fellow migrants who demand this. Paying the *pizzo*, as it is known, to the local mafia is an engrained way of life in Sicily, and some migrants appear to have taken to this noxious practice as a means of personal survival. “Here you pay the *pizzo* for everything, even to sell fruit at a street corner. It is a tragedy of this land, of all southern Italy,” said Elvira Iovino of Centro Astalli. “Foreigners have learnt this – they have seen and suffered the worst we have to offer, and now they do it as well.”



Some migrants try to make ends meet by selling goods at the market in Catania.

Without work, what can I do?

The single-most urgent need of the people we interviewed was to work – even the desire to get a document was closely linked to the possibility this opened up of finding a job afterwards. So much so some of those who were still waiting for a document harboured unrealistic expectations about getting work once they had one. For our interviewees, work meant more than survival and occupying the time, it symbolised hope for the future, for their families, for the fruition of their dreams. But although the refugees might be more than willing to work,

jobs are very hard to come by in Sicily. What with Italy's economic crisis and Sicily's burgeoning unemployment rate, it is difficult for anyone to find work. Official statistics of the island's unemployment vary between 21% and nearly 35%. Far fewer jobs are available now, with a staggering 73,000 jobs lost in 2013 alone. In such a scenario, the possibilities for exploitation are rife: no contracts, no security and low pay coupled with long hours and poor conditions of work, especially in the agriculture sector.

“Even when we receive the document, there is no job. Without a job, the document is like it is invalid – what can we do with it? I have a document now, but where am I going? This is troubling me in my mind every time. I left my wife and children two and a half years ago and I have no money to send them yet, I don’t know what I am doing.”

Michael

“I did my best to find work but it just wasn’t possible... I registered here in Catania, I registered before at CARA di Mineo, I wrote my curriculum vitae there and they promised to find work for us but never did. I went to different places to ask for a job but found nothing.”

Samir

“I have refugee status, I have been in Italy for more than seven years but still I have nothing, I don’t know about my future, what lies ahead, because I don’t know what to do. Wherever I look, front, back, sideways, everything is blocked. The situation in Italy is very tough. Since arriving when I was 16, I have lived in Sicily, Rome and then Sicily again. I do odd jobs here and there but life is difficult. What I earn now doesn’t even cover the rent. My family must send me money to pay the rent from Afghanistan. Is my family going to send me money for the rest of my life? I have a diploma as an Italian pastry cook but I can’t find work. I go to the employment office and, before I have time to knock, they tell me there is nothing. It’s difficult to get a proper job because most employers refuse to give a contract, they can find as many workers as they like; they tell you to take or leave what they offer and can throw you out whenever they want.”

Jawad



“I have a document now so everything is in place but still I don’t have any work. When Centro Astalli asked me if I wanted to do a care-worker course, I thought, why not? It may help me find work... it’s too difficult without. Sicily has good people, and Catania is a good place to live, but without work, what can I do? Sometimes I find daily work but I never managed to get a proper job. I searched for work in so many places, every day I go to the employment office but when they call to make enquiries, no one answers. This is the biggest problem I have now.”

Abraham

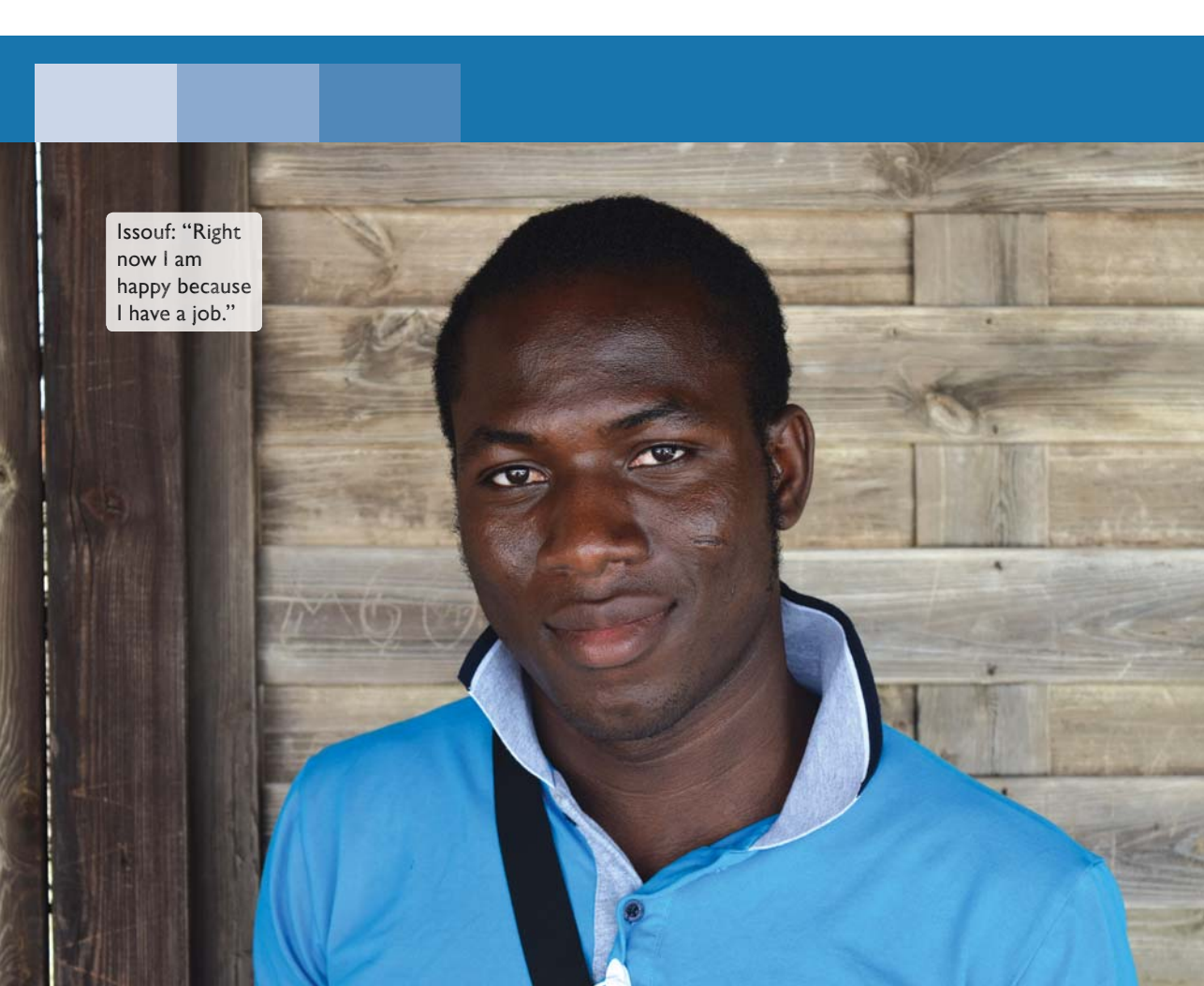
“I’ve heard that if I have a document, they will give me a place to stay so I am waiting for this. Then I’d like to go to a driving school; back home, my work was to drive a big lorry.”

Adam

Exploitation

Thousands of immigrants in Sicily and other parts of southern Italy are exploited for seasonal agricultural labour in a criminal practice known as *caporalato*. Flourishing in areas where organised crime and the black market prevail, the *caporalato* is basically an illegal way for employers to recruit manpower, by engaging a *caporale* to find and bring daily labourers to the workplace. The labourers are made to work long hours in poor conditions and the *caporale* takes a massive cut from their wages, sometimes more than 50%. Not surprisingly it is usually “invisible people” like migrants who fall prey to this exploitation. As Fabrizio Gatti, a journalist who investigated the practice of *caporalato*, said: “People who don’t have any work accept to work in extreme conditions, even to the extent of earning 50 cents an hour. Often they are not even paid at the end of the week.”

Research has described the *caporalato* as a “flourishing business” with “indecent working conditions” in Catania’s agriculture industry. This is partly because many companies sub-contract their business with the risk that illegal networks will step in. In the city of Catania, at dawn, trucks stop at collection points between the train station and the harbour to pick up migrants to take them to pick agricultural produce like cherry tomatoes in nearby farms. The *caporale* takes money out of their meagre wages for the ride, for the bottle of water and *panino* (sandwich), for just about everything. The migrants say that at the end of the day, they end up with about five or six euro for their hard work. The regional anti-Mafia chief said this abuse leads to a war between the poor, between “foreigners condemned to endure humiliation and unspeakable exploitation and our agricultural labourers, who are forced to be inactive, expelled from the precarious agricultural labour market”.



Issouf: “Right now I am happy because I have a job.”

Looking on the brighter side

Although most of the refugees and asylum seekers we met were unhappy with their lot, we did come across a few who were relatively content and calm. There were clearly discernable reasons for this. Some had just got their documents and this buoyed their optimism. The two refugees who appeared to be the most settled had stayed not in CARA di Mineo but in smaller reception centres that offered solid opportunities for integration and this made a big

difference. Other significant factors were having a place to call home and a job or at least the possibility of getting one. Those who appeared to be happier also tended to have more Italian friends. While luck played a part in their destiny it seems that such good fortune is not the portion of many: from what we saw and heard from refugees and veteran Centro Astalli workers, success stories are the exception, not the rule.

“I stayed in a SPRAR called Aci Sant’ Antonio near Catania for two years and four months. First I went to high school and then I did a course to be a pizzaiolo (to make pizza). The centre was ok – they gave us food and other necessary things like clothes and shoes. We had entertainment and optional activities, not to get bored, so we didn’t have time to think and worry. I made a lot of Italian friends while I was in the camp – I am a musician, a Gospel hip-hop artist, my mode of music is praising God and thanking him for all he has done in our lives. The camp managers would call me to give concerts in town, in the church, in schools.

I left the camp after I got a document, so now I can walk in the streets and not be afraid of the police – the Centro Astalli lawyer helped me a lot, he is my numero uno! I was looking for a job for a year but I couldn’t find anything. I used to go around the streets asking people if they have a job for me. Then I got lucky. A friend of mine helped me to get a job at a new supermarket. I help people load their shopping in the car, especially elderly people. I’m a trolley-ista! The customers say I am good and respectful, I sweep the compound every blessed day, and the managers are happy with me and treat me well, they are 100% kind to me. They say that as time goes on, they will give me a good contract. God is helping me through this job. I live in a house with my girlfriend, we pay rent, we have food... one thing I believe is that it is good to be positive, you have to believe, not necessarily that you will find, but to have confidence anyway. My stay in Italy is good, I thank God. What makes me happiest is that I have documents. We strangers in Europe need documents to do things for ourselves.”

Bob



“There is a big difference between life at CARA di Mineo and life in Catania because at CARA, I didn’t have freedom, I couldn’t really do what I wanted, but here in Catania, I am free, I have friends, I am learning Italian, and this is all very important for me. I started to talk Italian after just one month of classes and this is really good. The thing I want most now is to find work, because I must live, I must have a family, I want to get married... I want to have a normal life. I have hope for the future because if you have health, you can have hope.”

Marcel



Bob with his girlfriend:
 "My stay in Italy is
 good, I thank God."

"My family is in Pakistan – I left a wife, a daughter and son behind. My son was just a baby then, he must have grown so much. I spent 27 months at CARA di Mineo but I'm happy that finally, after receiving a rejection the first time, I have documents. I have been here at the CARA for a very long time, but I didn't have any other way to go – I could not work outside because I didn't have documents, I couldn't go back to Pakistan, what I could do? I am so happy now because I have documents. My hopes are to find a job, to bring my family here and to have a happy life without serious problems. I want to do so many things for my children and for my parents back home."

Nazeer

"I came by boat to Lampedusa, and then I was transferred to Sicily to a reception centre – not a CARA though. While staying there, I went to a school for interpreters – I had educational qualifications from home and I could show them so I got into the school, I was lucky – and later I found a job as a cultural mediator. When I left the centre, since I had a job, I could rent a house. Although my pay is poor, at least I can still survive and send money home every month. I really need to help my family, they don't have a good life so I send half my wages to my parents and sisters, and keep the other half here. You know, when you see with your eyes how people are suffering, you have to help... I have a job, I eat, I am ok, but I know my family suffers so I have to help them more than I help myself. Right now I am happy because I have a job; I have everything. But we are all Africans and I see my friends, the way they are suffering, and I am not happy with that. More people are sleeping outside. Just go to the train station and see. I am lucky because I went to school, I learned more, I am intelligent, God helped me. In my country I had to suffer but here I have not suffered too much and I thank God for that."

Issouf

Everywhere you have the good and the bad

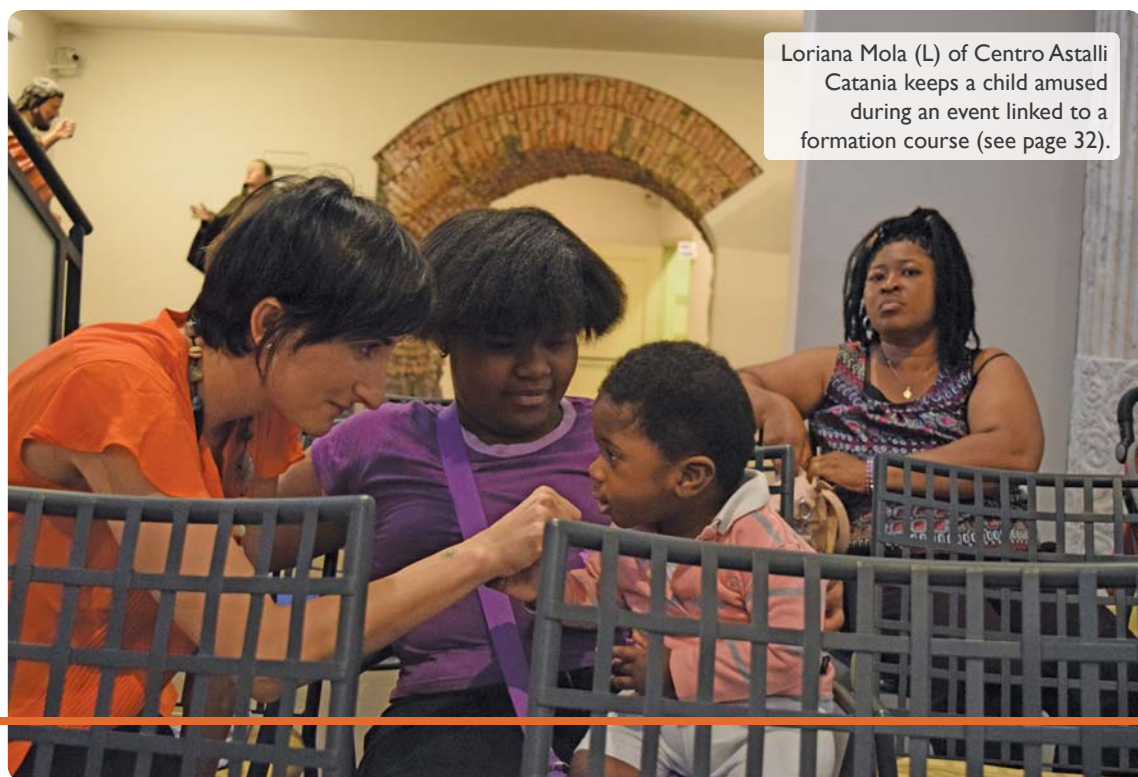
The attitude of the Sicilian people is obviously a key factor in determining the wellbeing of the migrants on the island. There is no doubt that Sicilians display concrete solidarity towards those who arrive to their shores: daily gestures by individuals, NGOs and communities bear witness to their compassion. In just one of countless examples, a parish priest told us how his parishioners buy food detailed on his “shopping list” for meals that they themselves prepare and serve to homeless people, among them refugees. Centro Astalli has no experience of hostile acts by Sicilians towards refugees and other forced migrants – quite the opposite in fact,

mutual solidarity is strong even in these tough times.

Our interviewees differed in evaluating the response of the local community: some were glowing with praise because they had known only kindness and had made friends, while others had been the butt of racist behaviour and so verged towards the negative. Then there were those who were philosophical, taking the good with the bad.

“The people I sit down with, I did not see any act of racism from them, they take everyone as equal.”

Bob



Loriana Mola (L) of Centro Astalli Catania keeps a child amused during an event linked to a formation course (see page 32).



“When the police gave us an expulsion order and pushed us into the streets, we were two, three days with no food except some bread that people gave us because they were sorry for us. Then an Italian man came and asked us what our problem was. We explained and showed him the expulsion paper. He said this was a very bad act and that he had not seen this kind of thing in Italy before. He went and called some journalists, and we told them what happened. There were many Italian sympathisers who came to meet us, to bring clothes or food. Even some police who met us said they were sorry, that they had not heard about such things happening. The journalists found a lawyer and accommodation for us.

Since I have been here, however, I see that most people are not friendly when they see black skin. When you talk to them, they don't respond, they snub you, ignore you, if you go to ask them something in the street... they look at you as if you smell or something. I don't know what they think in their minds, so I live my life and they live theirs. But there are still good people, and this is natural, everywhere you have the good and bad.”

Godwin

“I'm learning Italian and would like to make Italian friends. Some treat us like brothers and are so generous while others insult us, calling us 'cornuto' (bastard). It happens. Yesterday, when I was walking in the street, two children spat at me, but I didn't take it seriously because they were just kids.”

Matthieu

“I have Italian friends. We met in the many courses I went to, Italian classes and so on. In my work, since I am an interpreter, I meet Italian people every day and translate for them. My friends are very, very good and I pray to God to be friends with them all my life because they take care of me, and I try to help them too. However I have also met some Italian people who were racist in their dealings with me. I used to work as a waiter in a restaurant and once, when I went to serve someone, he told me he would not eat the food because I am black. We are all human beings so we are supposed to leave these things aside. It is God who created people with their colour, me with my black colour, but we are all the same.”

Issouf

In 2014, Centro Astalli helped to organise a formation course for 60 migrants in Catania, Palermo and Modica. The project was called *Itinerari d'incontro – Azioni per l'inclusione socio-lavorativa degli immigranti* (Journeys of encounter – Actions for the socio-employment inclusion of immigrants). In practical terms, the participants were trained to be care-workers with elderly people or children. Such endeavours are great because they give migrants the chance to share their talents and gifts and to find work in areas where jobs are available. Plus, they create the possibility of positive encounters between refugees and Sicilians.



During a presentation about the formation course in Catania.

“The project broke through political slogans and other barriers just by getting things done.”

*Dr Livio Marchese,
Modica, course tutor*

“Initially there was resistance when the refugees went to do their work experience because they went into an area that until then had been exclusively Italian. But this resistance melted so fast, the work experience actually translated into work opportunities for some.”

Loriana Mola, Centro Astalli

“When we finished our course placement as care-workers, the elderly people did not want us to leave and nor did the staff. It became like a family because we worked well together. We learned a lot that we didn’t know before.”

Mathieu

“This has been the most beautiful time of my life because I got on so well with the elderly people. In my culture, we do everything for the elderly and we really love them. They didn’t want us to leave. They said, no, why are you finishing, stay with us!”

Mary

Asylum/protection seeker: Someone who has lodged – or intends to lodge – an application for international protection.

CARA: *Centri di Accoglienza per Richiedenti Asilo* are centres for the reception of asylum seekers that were set up in Italy in 2008.

Dublin Regulation: A legal act adopted by the European Union. It regulates the criteria and procedures that determine which EU member state is responsible for dealing with an individual asylum claim.

Forced migrant: This is not an official or legal term. However JRS Europe uses the definition to describe people who are not refugees according to the 1951 Geneva Convention but who are embraced by the “de facto refugee” definition found in the teachings of the Catholic Church. Hence, for us, a “forced migrant” is a person who cannot return to his country of origin because of human rights violations (or well-founded fear of the same), armed conflict, erroneous economic policy or natural disasters.

Refugee: According to the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees adopted by the UN in July 1951, a refugee is a person who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution, for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside his country of origin and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

Refugee status: This status is given by a state to a foreign national who has been recognised as a refugee.

SPRAR: *Servizio di Protezione per i Richiedenti Asilo e i Rifugiati* is the national system of protection for asylum seekers and refugees. It is a system of reception and integration run by the Ministry for Internal Affairs, in collaboration with humanitarian organisations, to offer asylum seekers and refugees accommodation and help to integrate in Italian society.

UNHCR: The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, a UN agency set up in 1950 to protect and assist refugees.

In this booklet, we use the terms *asylum seeker*, *protection seeker*, *refugee* and *forced migrant*. When writing about people who have lodged asylum applications or who have been granted protection, we use the specific terms *asylum seeker*, *protection seeker* or *refugee*. When writing in more general terms about all those who arrive in Sicily by boat, we tend towards the term *forced migrants*. However it is important to note that these categories are not mutually exclusive.

In the light of these findings, JRS calls upon the government of Italy:

- To continue its efforts to save lives in the Mediterranean Sea through the Mare Nostrum operation;
- To assure the prompt examination of asylum claims while maintaining the high quality of the interviews, so as not to delay the start of the reception and integration process;
- To strengthen emergency measures in Sicily, using large facilities only for very brief stays; in all cases, to ensure that reception conditions are characterised by respect for human dignity, by individual attention that takes into account the traumatic experience of the people being received, and by transparency in management;
- To constantly monitor so as to ensure that all asylum seekers in CARA are guaranteed complete information, qualified legal support, adequate healthcare and orientation to life in Italy;
- To move away from the large-scale approach to reception that is concentrated in a few extensive facilities (CARA) and to endorse the swift insertion of people in an inclusion-oriented reception system, with an adequate number of places spread across Italy, according to the capacity of each region;
- To introduce effective measures to support refugees as they seek residential and employment opportunities, for instance by including them in social housing programs and supporting their access to the labour market.

JRS also calls upon the European Union (EU) institutions:

- To urgently develop a set of strategies for safe and legal ways to access protection in Europe that meet the needs of different groups of persons fleeing human rights violations, war, violence and other dangers so that they will no longer be forced to risk their lives in unseaworthy boats in the Mediterranean;
- To take over the responsibility for ensuring that sufficient resources are deployed for effective search and rescue operations at sea and that procedures are set in place to quickly and effectively determine the authority responsible for rescuing an individual boat in distress;
- To ensure that all persons who reach the external borders of the EU and claim to be in need of protection are referred to proper procedures and assistance on EU territory;
- To urge and, where necessary, assist member states in setting up procedures and infrastructure that allow for a fair asylum process, proper reception conditions and the integration of asylum seekers into the host community;
- To thoroughly review the “Dublin system” and ensure that asylum seekers are no longer forced to apply for protection in countries with asylum systems that do not meet EU standards;
- To establish mechanisms that allow for the mutual recognition of international protection status in all EU member states.

Credits

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*“You have problems at home,
then you find problems here again,
what can you do? Remember,
we are all here because we have
problems in our country. No one
would leave otherwise.”*

Issouf

Arrivals in Lampedusa.

www.jrseurope.org
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